

# Symphonies For Sale

*How the arts advertise*

By Alvin H. Reiss

**T**imes have changed. The soft-sell promotional effort that once characterized the arts approach to audiences has all but vanished. Today arts groups enthusiastically reach out for audiences and use such unlikely pitchmen to represent them as football coach Paul "Bear" Bryant, chicken processor Frank Perdue, statesman Henry Kissinger, and ex-quarterback Roger Staubach. Their messages are strong, sometimes funny, and invariably on target.

In a recent Dallas Symphony season subscription flier, Staubach, dressed as Mozart, urged audiences to "compose yourself—everybody's doing it." Perdue, whose hawkish face and raspy voice are known to millions of East Coast television viewers for his chicken commercials featuring his famous sign-off, "It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken," promoted the American Museum of Natural History's Feather Arts exhibition in a series of public-service television spots. One of his sixty-second messages ended with the sage observation, "It takes a tender museum to put on such a delicate show."

## Beyond The Inner Circle

If cultural groups are more aggressive today than ever before, it's because the stakes are higher. Over the past twenty years the arts have moved from a place outside the sphere of everyday life to assume a key role in community affairs. Where once professional arts activity was limited to a handful of major cities, today every city of any size, and many smallish towns as well, can boast their own theater company, symphony orchestra, museum, burgeoning dance troupe, or artists' cooperative. Breaking the shackles of exclusivity, which once froze out all but a knowledgeable few from involvement in the arts, cultural groups have used every available means to make up for lost years and tap the many audiences intimidated by "culture" for too long.

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The effort is pragmatic as well as altruistic. Not only do larger audiences help pay back part of the production and exhibition costs (nonprofit arts groups dedicated to keeping prices low and changing their programs lose money even with full houses), but they help to shape the artistic product and provide support and encouragement for the producing group. Today's subscriber is tomorrow's contributor—or had better be if the company is to survive in a period of

season subscriptions. In the lexicon of arts administrators, an increasing number of them alumni of graduate arts management programs, marketing has become a key word, and the subject has been taught at scores of arts seminars and conferences each year. Typical of many was a recent program at New York University, which included a session on "How New Product Theory Positions and Sells the Arts."

The new professional approach has



rising costs and decreasing government support.

What has typified the arts selling approach more than anything else is professionalism. The Brooklyn Academy of Music, whose acronym, BAM, might stand for its aggressive marketing program, was hailed on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* for its "High Class Hoopla." Hundreds of performing arts groups have been helped by such super-salesmen as Danny Newman, an opera publicist, who has crisscrossed the country teaching his technique of selling

enabled arts groups to go after very specific audiences. A classical example of this was the Seattle Opera's pitch to University of Washington students some years ago when the opera company recruited students to sell season subscriptions to their classmates. Student-written ads heralded *La Bohème* as "the story of four old-time hippies in an attic." *Samson et Dalila* was described as "the original Middle-East crisis" complete with "orgies, dancing girls, a feast of passion and lust" while *Il Trovatore*, in language understood by many students

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who had struggled with Freshman English, was billed as having "a plot so involved that it makes *Finnigan's Wake* seem easy." The very same opera company later sold entire families on seeing its English-language production of *Madama Butterfly* through a promotion campaign with Union 76 gas stations throughout western Washington. As autos pulled up to gas pumps, customers were greeted by large color posters proclaiming, "Opera's a Gas" and pointed reminders such as "Come to the opera and bring Ethyl." Attendants wearing buttons reading "Join the Opera Union" cheerfully dispensed ticket-order envelopes along with gas and oil.

Doctors, too, have been a target of enterprising arts groups. To entice their colleagues to support Wilmington's Grand Opera House, a medical committee of nine doctors and their wives sent a letter to fellow doctors that read in part, "Dear Colleague: The association between music and medicine is an old one . . . illness pervades the last act of more operas than can be quickly counted. One can imagine the disastrous last act of *Bohème* had Mimi, instead of wasting away from TB, sustained a sudden cardiac arrest. In short, medicine has been there when music needed it. Now there is a new call for our help."

### The Aggressive Approach

Put bluntly, arts promoters have learned, as the late publisher and arts supporter Arnold Gingrich once told symphony leaders, that "you have to sell the arts like you sell soap." If arts promotion is sometimes frivolous and demeaning, the product it represents, the art itself, is sacrosanct. Generally speaking, non-profit arts groups use any

device to promote their program or organization as long as it's in good taste, but they never change the artistic product merely to accommodate an audience.

As audience has become a major arts concern, a service industry has sprung up that, through carefully devised programs, has helped to identify and tap a variety of audiences. Community arts agencies, now numbering more than two thousand—there were about fifty in 1962—aggressively promote arts events in their communities through newsletters and mailings, taped telephone messages, community-wide salutes, televised spot announcements, and sampler programs and promotional campaigns, many sponsored by local business. For this past season's Oklahoma Community Arts Council Month, twenty-five state banks included 140,000 arts promotion pieces as bank statement stuffers. Some councils use outrageous means to awaken audience interest including a "Go Ape for the Arts" campaign in Springfield, Illinois; a sombrero-wearing, guitar-playing Mona Lisa logo in El Paso, Texas; and a Great Submarine Race in Dutchess County, New York.

The contestants in the latter event attracted tremendous attention precisely because the submarines were never actually seen by spectators lining the banks of the Hudson River, although the "winning" captain emerged in frogman gear from the river to accept his trophy.

Groups with a stake in reaching specific audiences have begun to whet the artistic appetites of many individuals who never had prior exposure to the arts. Hospital Audiences Inc. has made cultural programs available to an aggregate audience of over two million handicapped and institutionalized people in

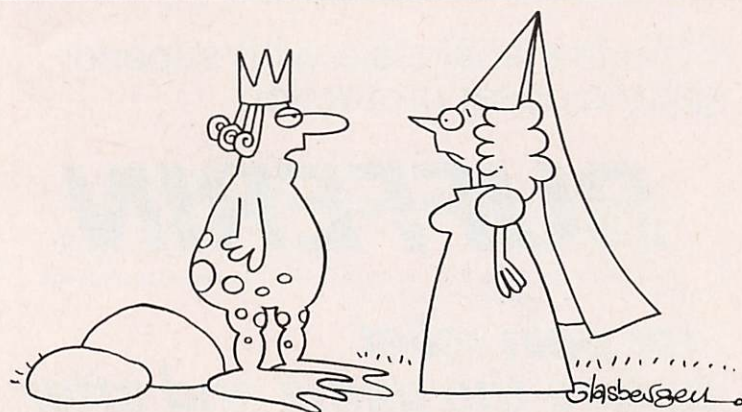
the past decade, including thousands of wheelchair patients brought to outdoor cultural events this summer, while Museums Collaborative Inc., through its voucher program, has involved residents of scores of community agencies in educational experiences in New York City's museums, zoos, and botanical gardens.

### Accessibility Is All

Theatre Development Fund, best noted for its half-price ticket booths in New York City's Times Square, has pioneered in an even more imaginative program in the city designed to make arts attendance easy and regular for people who otherwise might not be able to afford it. Those on TDF's mailing list—students, teachers, union members, retired people, clergy, and members of community groups—can purchase vouchers for theater, music, and dance performances at \$2 each, in sets of five, with each voucher redeemable for a ticket at participating arts programs. Participating groups, in turn, receive \$4 back from TDF for each voucher they return.

During its first season, 1972-73, sixteen thousand people redeemed TDF vouchers at theaters. In the 1979-80 season, with the program expanded to include music and dance, in addition to theater, over 132,000 vouchers were used. What the voucher concept has done, more than anything else perhaps, is to instill the arts-going habit into the lives of many people who can now afford to go to a concert, dance, or theater performance on impulse. A recent Friday night listing for groups accepting TDF vouchers showed that voucher holders could choose from over seventy different New York City cultural events.

Another key to audience development has been availability. Where once virtually all cultural events took place in traditional settings, today culture has become a moveable feast with events presented in factories, shopping centers, supermarkets, court houses, and even legislative chambers. "Alternative spaces" have sprung up everywhere from a former warehouse to a converted torpedo factory. If "the arts are where the people are," as one group proclaimed in its promotional material, then proponents of the arts invariably will find ways to reach new audiences where they are. And as new converts to the arts are discovering more and more, they need the arts as much as the arts need them. ■



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Reference: 1. Abraham, W.M.: Exercise-induced muscle soreness, *The Physician and Sportsmedicine* 7:57-60, Oct, 1979.



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